DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 209 484 CE 030 503

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TITLE Factors Influencing Year 9 Students' Intentions to Leave School.
INSTITUTION Victoria Inst. of Secondary Education, Melbourne (Australia).
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 24p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; *Dropout Attitudes; *Dropout Characteristics; Dropout Research; Dropouts; Education Work Relationship; Family Characteristics; Females; Grade 9; Influences; Males; Occupational Aspiration; Parent Aspiration; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Background; *Parent Influence; Parent Student Relationship; *Potential Dropouts; School Holding Power; Secondary Education; Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; Student Educational Objectives
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Victoria)

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in Victoria, Australia, to examine the factors that influence Year 9 students' intentions to leave secondary school. Discriminant function analysis was used to determine the effects of family background variables, school characteristics, significant others, personal assessments, and attitudes on school-leaving intentions of 2,300 students. The results indicate that the school-leaving intentions of both boys and girls are most influenced by the aspirations they perceive their parents holding for them, their attitudes toward school, and their occupational aspirations; and that these factors mediate the effects of family background and school characteristics. Students who intended to leave school earliest perceived that their parents had low educational aspirations for them, held negative attitudes toward school, and aspired to low status jobs. (Author/KC)

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Factors Influencing Year 9 Students' Intentions to Leave School

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This study examines the factors that influence Year 9 students' intentions to leave secondary school. Discriminant function analysis was used to determine the effects of family background variables, school characteristics, significant others, personal assessments and attitudes on school-leaving intentions. The results indicate that the school-leaving intentions of both boys and girls are most influenced by the aspirations they perceive their parents hold for them, their attitudes toward school and their occupational aspirations and that these factors mediate the effects of family background and school characteristics. Students who intended to leave school earliest perceived that their parents had low educational aspirations for them, held negative attitudes toward school and aspired to low status jobs.

The transition of young people from secondary school to work or further study is currently receiving much attention. Concern with transition is probably due in part to the high youth unemployment rate which has focused attention upon the problems young people face when they leave school. In the current economic climate, the early school-leaver is confronted by overwhelming employment difficulties. Given the lack of available jobs, competition for employment is fierce and those who leave school earliest appear to have the fewest marketable assets with which to compete. Research and survey results have indicated that those with the least education suffer most from unemployment and, if they do obtain a job, find themselves in low status occupations (Sturman, 1979; Williams et al., 1980a). Furthermore, the experience of unemployment for early school-leavers involves debilitating psychological and sociological effects: researchers have found that unemployed youth suffer from frustration, depression, anger and loss of self-confidence (Wilson, 1979; Office of Youth Affairs, 1979).

The acute youth unemployment problem has raised the question of whether various sectors of society (i.e., school, family and government) could better prepare young people for their lives after school. As a result, the problems facing youth in transition have recently been the focus of research (Poole, 1978a; Wilson, 1979; Office of Youth Affairs, 1979; Carpenter et al., 1980; Williams et al., 1980a, 1980b). The aim of such research is to illuminate the transition process and thereby suggest methods of dealing with transition problems for teachers, parents and policymakers. The goal of transition research is not to

keep young people at school, but to ensure that the school experience adequately prepares them for life beyond school.

To obtain some understanding of the transition process it is important to understand the factors that influence young people in their decision to leave school. Research on early school-leavers has indicated a relationship between school-leaving behaviour and family background, type of school attended, ability, attitudes toward school and parental influence.

In considering the variables that influence school-leaving, the effects of family background variables must be taken into account. Father's occupational level, which has been used by many researchers to reflect family socio-economic status, and ethnic background are two important family background influences. Both have been found to influence school-leaving behaviour, with those from higher status families and those from migrant backgrounds more likely to stay on at school (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976; Williams et al., 1980a, 1980b).

Some school characteristics have also been related to school-leaving behaviour. Research indicates that those attending government schools leave school earlier than non-government school students (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976; Poole, 1978b; Williams et al., 1980a). There is also some evidence that rural students are more likely to become early school-leavers than their urban counterparts (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976; Sturman, 1979; Stoessiger, 1980), although the extent of this effect has been questioned by recent research (Williams et al., 1980a).

Research has indicated a strong relationship between school-leaving behaviour and ability, self-perception of ability and achievement motivation (Williams et al., 1980a, 1980b; Sturman, 1979; Poole, 1978a). Students of greater ability, those who perceive themselves to be of greater ability and those who have greater achievement motivation are more likely to stay on at school. There also appears to be a relationship between attitudes toward school and school-leaving. The evidence suggests that those who leave school early are more likely to dislike school and find school irrelevant to their futures (Poole, 1978a; Sturman, 1979).

Parents' expectations and aspirations for their children appear to be an important influence on school-leaving (Commission of Inquiry into Poverty, 1976; Poole, 1978a), although this effect may be confounded by socio-economic background. In general, parents in higher socio-economic status families appear to have higher educational expectations for their children who, in turn, stay on longer at school.

The present study is a description of the school-leaving intentions of a representative sample of 1980 Victorian Year 9 students and an investigation of the factors that influence their intentions. The effect on school-leaving intentions of several factors are studied: those variables discussed above which have been shown to relate to school-leaving behaviour and other variables which are expected to effect students' intentions to leave school. The effects of variables are not measured in isolation but are studied simultaneously as parts of a related set of factors influencing school-leaving intentions.

METHOD

The Sample

The sample consisted of 2300 Year 9 students from 26 Victorian secondary schools. Schools were randomly selected from a sampling frame stratified according to the following school characteristics: location (i.e., metropolitan, country and country-urban), affiliation (i.e., government, Catholic and other independent), sex-type (i.e., single-sex and coeducational) and orientation (i.e., high schools and technical schools). All Year 9 students from selected schools were surveyed on background information, vocational and educational plans, school-leaving intentions and attitudes toward school.

Procedure

The present study is an investigation of the factors that influence the school-leaving intentions of Year 9 students. The effects on intentions of family-background variables, school characteristics, influence of significant others, personal assessments and attitudes are explored. To fully understand how these variables relate to students' intentions, it was necessary to employ a multivariate data analysis technique to analyse the data. When the effects of several variables are being considered, it is important to use multivariate analysis so that interrelationships among variables are taken into account.

The multivariate analysis used to analyse the data was discriminant function analysis. Discriminant function analysis is a means of determining differences that exist among specified groups on a number of variables (Tatsuoka, 1971). In the present study, students were allocated into groups on the basis of their intentions to leave secondary school. Several dependent variables were chosen which were expected to relate to school-leaving intentions. Discriminant function analysis was then used to relate the dependent variables to school-leaving intentions. The results of the analysis indicated the contribution of each variable in discriminating among students' intentions, while holding the effects of the other variables constant.

The dependent variables used to relate to school-leaving intentions consisted of variables reflecting family background (i.e., father's occupation, mother's employment status, parents' educations, migrant background), school characteristics (i.e., affiliation, location, orientation, sex-type), influence of significant others (i.e., parents' educational aspirations for student, friends' school-leaving intentions, others' opinions about suitability of job choice, frequency of discussions with others about future plans) and personal assessments (i.e., attitudes toward school, self-rating of school achievement, further education plans, occupational aspiration, job decisiveness).

The independent variable, intention to leave school, consisted of four groups: those who intended to leave before Year 11, those who intended to leave at the end of Year 11, those who intended to complete Year 12 and those who were unsure of their intentions.

To assess the usefulness of the discriminant function in differentiating among students' school-leaving intentions, a classification analysis was computed. Classification analysis is a method of comparing predicted intention, as determined by the discriminant function, to actual intention (Nie et al., 1975). The extent to which predicted intention corresponds to actual intention is an indicator of the utility of the discriminant function in predicting school-leaving intentions.

Analyses were computed separately by sex because it was expected that factors influencing intention to leave school might differ for girls and boys. Subjects with missing data on any of the variables were excluded from the analysis.

RESULTS

School-leaving intentions of Victorian Year 9 students

The Year 9 students' plans for leaving secondary school are presented in Table 1. The percentages indicate that few students planned to leave school before Year 10 and the majority of students hoped to stay on at school at least until the completion of Year 11. There were statistically significant differences in the school-leaving plans of boys and girls ($\chi^2_5 = 68.5$; $p < .001$) with boys planning to leave school earlier than girls. Equal percentages of boys and girls were unsure about their intentions to leave school.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Students who planned to leave school before the end of Year 12 were asked their one main reason for leaving school. Their responses indicated that leaving school to get a job was by far the most common reason to leave school for both boys (70%) and girls (56%). Dislike for school was the next most common reason to leave with 15% of boys and 17% of girls indicating this response. Other possible responses were: to make a living and be independent (5% boys; 9% girls); poor report at school (3% boys; 5% girls); money problems (1% boys, 1% girls); other (including leaving to take up other training) (5% boys; 12% girls).

Discriminant Function Analyses

There was a substantial amount of missing data on some of the dependent variables (for example, many of the students were undecided about their further education plans, unsure of their friends' plans for leaving school or unaware of when their parents would like them to leave school). Because students with missing data on any one of the variables were excluded from the analysis, the resultant sample sizes were considerably reduced, comprising 462 boys and 521 girls.

The independent variable for the discriminant function analysis was intended time of leaving secondary school. Boys and girls were allocated to one of four groups on the basis of their school-leaving intentions: intending to leave prior to or at the end of Year 10 (N = 77 boys; 54 girls); intending to leave at the end of Year 11 (N = 91 boys; 58 girls); intending to complete Year 12 (N = 250 boys; 340 girls); unsure about intentions (N = 44 boys; 69 girls).

The discriminant function analyses produced a significant function for both the boys' and girls' data. The standardised weights which define the functions are presented in Table 2. Each variable weight represents the unique contribution of that variable to the function, with the effects of the other variables held constant. To interpret the functions it is necessary to consider the direction and relative magnitude of each variable weight.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The discriminant function weights indicate that, for both boys and girls, the major influence on decision to leave school was perceived parental aspirations. Students who felt that their parents wanted them to stay on at school intended to stay on longer. Attitudes toward school and occupational aspiration also contributed moderately to the definition of both the boys' and the girls' function. Students who intended to stay on at school had more positive attitudes toward school and aspired to higher level jobs.

A discriminant function can be conceptualized as a continuum. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the continua corresponding to boys' and girls' school-leaving intentions. A comparison of figures 1 and 2 indicates that the continuum representing boys' intentions is similar to that representing girls' intentions. One end of the continuum is defined by students who perceived that their parents wanted them to stay on longer at school, who had favourable attitudes toward school and who had high occupational aspirations. The group centroid of students who planned to complete Year 12 lies at this end of the

continuum. The other end of the continuum is defined by students who perceived that their parents wanted them to leave school earlier, who had negative attitudes toward school and who had lower occupational aspirations. The group centroid of those who planned to leave school earliest (i.e., by the end of Year 10) lies at this end of the continuum. The group centroid of students who were unsure of their intentions is between the centroids of those who planned to leave at the end of Year 11 and those who planned to complete Year 12.

The results of the classification analysis indicated that 68% of boys' predicted intentions and 74% of girls' predicted intentions corresponded to their actual school-leaving intentions. For both boys and girls, the discriminant function was most successful in classifying students who intended to complete Year 12, with 79% of boys and 83% of girls in this category correctly classified. Seventy-one percent of boys and 77% of girls intending to leave before Year 11 were correctly classified; 53% of boys and 68% of girls planning to leave at the end of Year 11 were correctly classified. The function was least successful in classifying those who were unsure of their school-leaving intentions, correctly classifying only 29% of boys and 35% of girls in this category. Those who were unsure of their intentions were more likely to be classified with those who intended to leave at the end of Year 11 or Year 12. The difficulty in classifying those who were unsure of their intentions indicates that this group is not as homogeneous as the other groups. The characteristics of those who were unsure of their intentions were similar to the characteristics of other students, resulting in a large number of misclassifications. Although the group centroids of students who were unsure of their intentions is between the Year 11 and Year 12

group centroids, this does not imply that the uncertain group will stay on past Year 11 but fail to complete Year 12.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study indicate that, at the Year 9 level, school characteristics and family background variables have little effect on school-leaving intentions. The major influence on students' intentions was their perception of how long their parents wanted them to stay on at school. Students' attitudes toward school and occupational aspirations also moderately influenced their intentions. The importance of parents' aspirations, attitudes toward school and occupational aspirations in determining school-leaving intentions is supported by other research (Poole, 1978a).

In comparison to the effects of parental aspiration, the effects of family background and school characteristics were negligible. School affiliation made a minor contribution to the discriminant function analysis, with boys from non-government schools somewhat more likely to intend to stay on at school.

The finding that family background and school characteristics have little effect on intentions to leave school is unexpected and contrary to the findings of other research. However, other studies have either failed to include all of the background and attitudinal variables included in the present study or have measured the effects of variables in isolation. The findings of the present study do not dispute that students from certain family backgrounds or types of schools might

differ in their school-leaving intentions; however, the results do indicate that aspirations and attitudinal factors mediate the effects of family background and school characteristics.

The results of the analyses suggest that the major factors influencing intentions to leave school are the same for boys and girls. Perceived parental aspiration, attitudes toward school and occupational aspirations were the primary determinants of school-leaving intentions for both sexes. Thus the process by which young people make decisions about leaving school appears to be quite similar for boys and girls.

There are, however, a few sex differences in the discriminant functions which suggest that some minor factors may exert differential influences on the intentions of boys and girls. The differences lie in the minor contribution made by school affiliation and self-perception of achievement to the definition of the boys' discriminant function and the contribution of friends' plans to the girls' function. Boys were more likely to intend to stay on at school if they attended a non-government school and had high self-perceptions of ability. Girls intended to stay on longer at school if their friends also intended to stay on. Although these variables do contribute to the definition of the functions, the magnitudes of their function weights are small, indicating that their contribution is relatively minor, particularly in comparison to the strong effect for parental aspirations.

In summary, the school-leaving intentions of both boys and girls at the Year 9 level appear to be most influenced by the aspirations their parents hold for them, their attitudes toward school and their

occupational aspirations. Those students who intended to stay on at school perceived that their parents expected them to stay on, had favourable attitudes toward school and high occupational aspirations. It is not surprising that those who intended to stay on were reacting to parental expectations (which may be in the form of pressure or encouragement), were finding school to be a positive and worthwhile experience and aspired to high level jobs which are likely to require educational qualifications. Those who intended to leave school earliest perceived that their parents had low educational expectations for them, were finding school to be a negative experience and, perhaps as a result, aspired to low status jobs which require less formal education. It is important to note that self-rating of school achievement was not a major influence on school-leaving intentions. Thus it appears that at the Year 9 level, negative attitudes toward school, rather than a sense of failure, influence students to leave school early.

The results of the present study demonstrate the importance of considering parental and attitudinal factors and aspirations when investigating the process by which young people make decisions about leaving school. These factors were found to influence intentions over and above the effects of family background and school characteristics.

TABLE 1

School-Leaving Intentions of Victorian Year 9 Students

Percentage planning to leave school...	Males	Females
before the end of Year 9	1	1
at the end of Year 9	5	3
at the end of Year 10	17	10
at the end of Year 11	20	13
at the end of Year 12	39	54
unsure about plans	18	18
N	1126	1156

$\chi^2_5 = 68.5 \quad p < .001$

TABLE 2

Standardised Discriminant Function Weights
For Boys and Girls

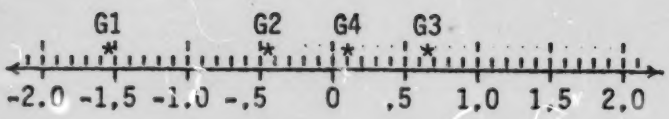
		Boys	Girls
Family Background Variables:	Father's Occupation	-.06	.05
	Mother's Employment Status	-.03	.08
	Father's Education	.07	.00
	Mother's Education	-.03	.02
	Migrant Background	-.05	-.02
School Characteristics:	School Affiliation	.12	-.10
	School Location	.03	-.02
	School Orientation	.06	-.02
	School Sex-Type	-.07	.10
Influence of Significant Others:	Perceived Parental Aspirations	.71	.62
	Friends' Plans	.01	.15
	Suitability of Job Choice	-.04	-.12
	Frequency of Discussions	-.03	.00
Personal Assessments:	Attitudes Toward School	.23	.25
	Self-Perception of Achievement	.12	.09
	Further Education Plans	.09	.10
	Occupational Aspiration	.23	.18
	Job Decisiveness	.02	.04
N		462	521
χ^2_{54}		592.0*	655.7*

*p < .001

FIGURE 1

CONTINUUM DEPICTING BOYS' SCHOOL-LEAVING INTENTIONS

-perceives low parental aspirations
-negative attitudes toward school
-low occupational aspirations



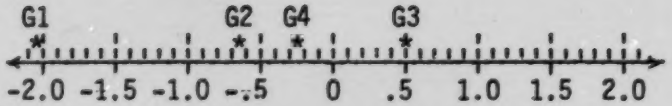
-perceives high parental aspirations
-positive attitudes toward school
-high occupational aspirations

Group		Centroid
G1	Leave by the end of Year 10	-1.55
G2	Leave at the end of Year 11	- .47
G3	Complete Year 12	.63
G4	Unsure of intentions	.09

FIGURE 2

CONTINUUM DEPICTING GIRLS' SCHOOL-LEAVING INTENTIONS

-perceives low parental aspirations
-negative attitudes toward school
-low occupational aspirations



-perceives high parental aspirations
-positive attitudes toward school
-high occupational aspirations

Group		Centroid
G1	Leave by the end of Year 10	-2.07
G2	Leave at the end of Year 11	- .63
G3	Complete Year 12	.48
G4	Unsure of intentions	- .24

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This study examines the factors that influence Year 9 students' intentions to leave secondary school. Discriminant function analysis was used to determine the effects of family background variables, school characteristics, significant others, personal assessments and attitudes on school-leaving intentions. The results indicate that the school-leaving intentions of both boys and girls are most influenced by the aspirations they perceive their parents hold for them, their attitudes toward school and their occupational aspirations and that these factors mediate the effects of family background and school characteristics. Students who intended to leave school earliest perceived that their parents had low educational aspirations for them, held negative attitudes toward school and aspired to low status jobs.